

Britain as a
military power



1688–1815



Jeremy Black

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Britain as a military power,
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Also by Jeremy Black and published by UCL Press

European warfare, 1660–1815

America or Europe? British foreign policy, 1739–63

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Published in the UK in 1999 by UCL Press
UCL Press Limited

Taylor & Francis Group
1 Gunpowder Square
London EC4A 3DE

and

325 Chestnut Street, 8th Floor
Philadelphia
PA 19106
USA

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002.

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ISBN: 1-85728-772-X HB
ISBN 0-203-00761-1 Master e-book ISBN
ISBN 0-203-17355-4 (Glassbook Format)

British Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data are available

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For Kim

Preface

Between the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688–9 and the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815, Britain became the strongest military power in the world, arguably the strongest at any time till then, and also the strongest in relative and absolute terms until the American century of the present age. This book is an attempt to explain this process. It concentrates on the military dimension, because it is all too easy to respond to understandable scholarly interest in themes such as state-building by losing sight of the course of conflict. In place of an emphasis on domestic political and economic factors at the expense of military ones, I have stressed the importance for Britain of armed force directly applied. We have to look at more than just institutional and resource reasons for Britain’s “greatness”.

Another important aspect of this work is its comprehensive nature. Britain’s military history for this period is usually considered in separate compartments: Europe, North America, the West Indies. Land and sea power are also placed in their own compartments. This book is unusual in that it combines land and sea, European and extra-European effectiveness and war. The entire spectrum of roles played by armed force in Britain’s rise to great-power status is synthesized.

The approach is not deterministic; instead, discussion of “structural” aspects of British strength is matched with consideration of the contingent nature of challenge and success. Intensive archival work leads to an emphasis on contingency and provides a sense of exceptions—of the singularity and malleability of events. Britain’s armed forces operated in unpredictable situations and particular circumstances. It is necessary to understand the alternate possibilities in given cases, and to provide a counterpoint to general works that seek similarities and congruences.

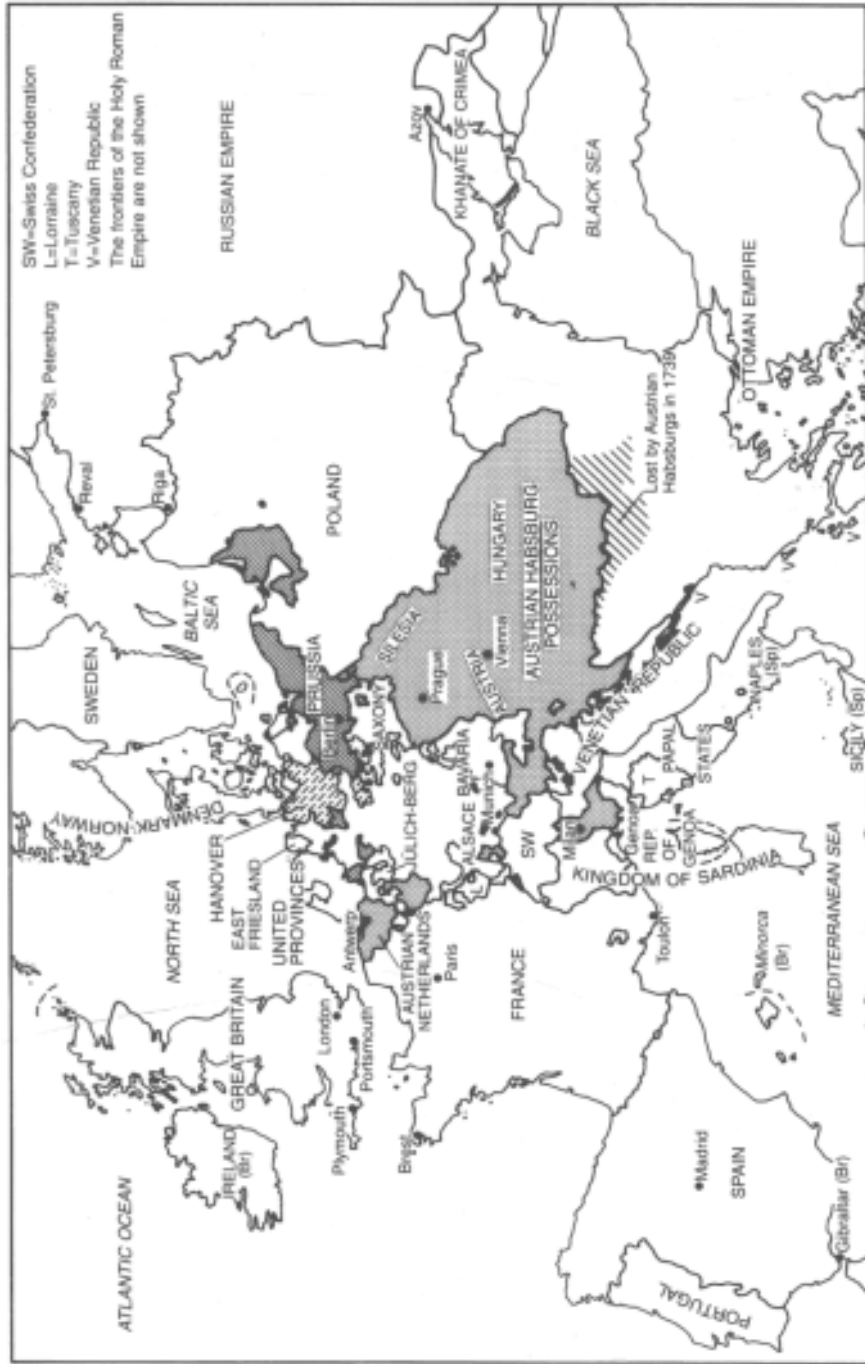
With more space, it would have been possible to include much that has unfortunately had to be omitted. Despite the temptation to remove much of the discussion of events, I have left this in because all too few people are

aware of them. Similarly, despite pressures of space, I have retained some of the accounts by participants: they offer a valuable perspective that counters the tendency to provide clear-cut descriptions of past engagements. They also serve as a reminder of the brutality and carnage of war. Major Skerry of the 52nd Regiment recorded after the victory of 15 May 1791 over the Indian ruler Tipu Sultan of Mysore, “The night of the 15th we lay on the field of action, amidst hundreds of mutilated carcasses, and shocked with the cries of such as had the misfortune to survive their wounds”. Another British participant noted

some of the poor fellows had ghastly wounds—you might easily distinguish the handywork of the 15th Regiment Dragoons who are very powerful men. Some wretches had half their faces cut off some their hands lying by their sides; and two bodies I particularly marked which had their heads severed clean off by a single stroke, and lay at a distance from the trunks.¹

I am grateful for the opportunity to develop views provided by giving lectures at the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe conference at Baton Rouge, the Newport Preservation Society conference on Trade and Empire, the Wellington conference at Southampton, the Triangle Institute for Security Studies, the Institute of Historical Research, and the Universities of Bristol, Cambridge, Exeter, Massachusetts—Boston, North Carolina—Asheville, Oxford, Richmond, Southeastern Louisiana, SUNY-Prospect, Texas—Dallas and Texas—San Antonio, at Adelphi, Appalachian State, James Madison, Lamar, Ohio State, Southern Methodist and Stephen F. Austin Universities, at the Virginia Military Institute, and at Assumption College and Mary Washington College. I am grateful to Enid Case for granting access to the Hill papers. I have benefited from the comments of Keith Bartlett, Huw Bowen, Gerry Bryant, John Derry, David Gates, Jan Glete, Richard Harding, Tony Hayter, Peter Marshall, Richard Middleton, Roger Morriss, Murray Pittock, Nicholas Rodger, Armstrong Starkey, Ian Steele, Philip Woodfine and three anonymous readers on earlier drafts of sections of the book. The book is dedicated to my brother-in-law with much appreciation for his friendship.

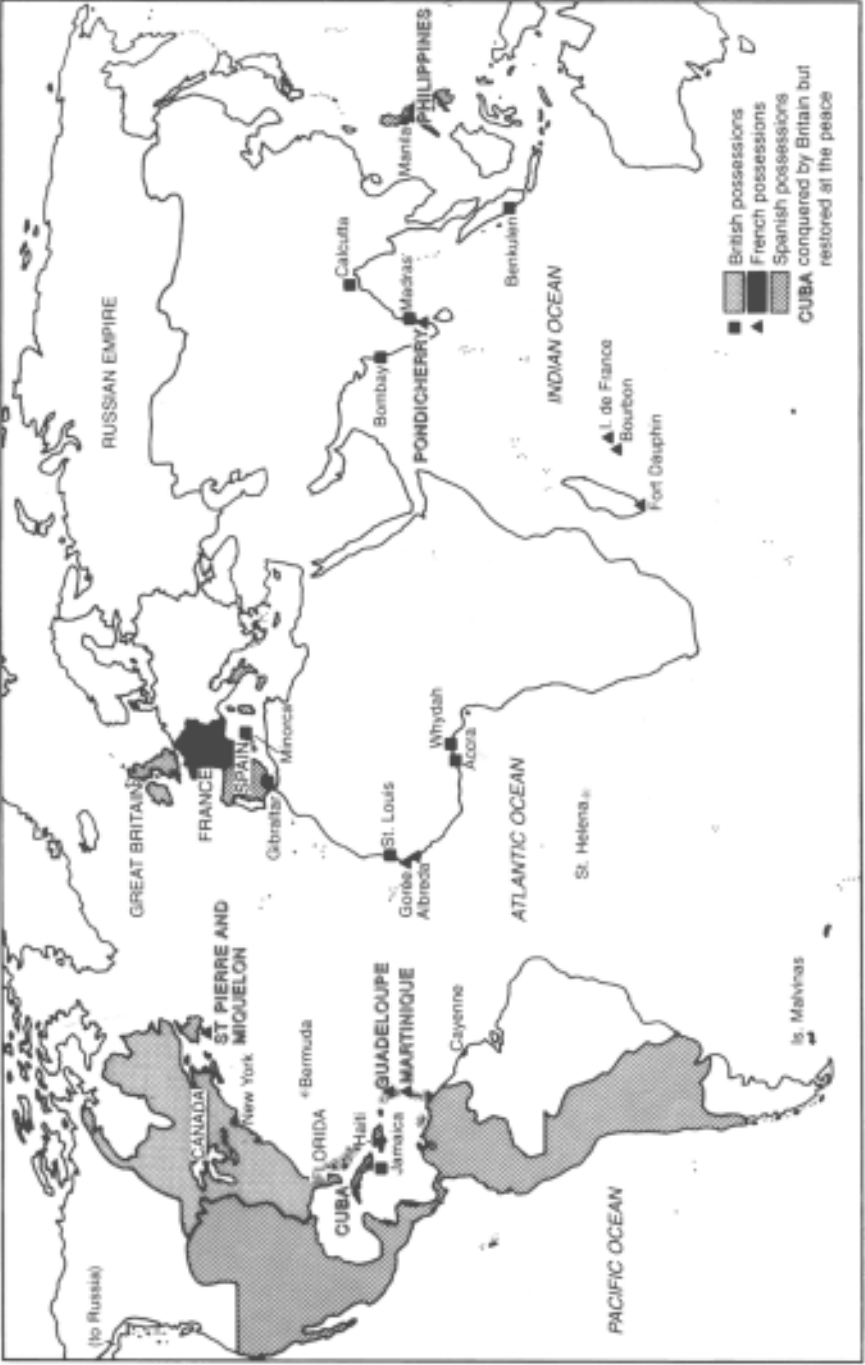
Maps



Europe in 1739



North America and the Caribbean



The world in 1763

Introduction

A parliamentary-based system

Between 1688 and 1815 Britain fought its way to being the strongest power in the world. This involved her forces in conflict across the globe, from the waters of the Pacific, where Anson captured the treasurefilled Manila Galleon, to the rocky reaches of the Breton coast, where warships sought signs of French opponents seeking to leave their blockaded bases. Redcoated soldiers served on every continent bar Antarctica, and braved disease and terrain without the technological aids their modern counterparts benefit from. Today, there is scant sympathy for imperial power and colonial rule, and indeed for war, especially if aggressive. There is also a risk that this lack of sympathy may lead to a failure to understand the nature of the British military achievement and its importance both for Britain and for other countries and peoples.

The current orthodoxy in explaining Britain's rise to great power status focuses on domestic political, rather than military, factors. It is based on the interpretation offered by John Brewer in his study *The sinews of power, war, money and the English state, 1688–1783* (1989). Brewer emphasizes the inherent strength and the political culture of Britain, specifically the system of parliamentary-backed public finance that raised substantial sums of money at a lower rate of interest than that paid by rivals, particularly France, the state that for most of the period opposed Britain in Europe, on the oceans and elsewhere in the world. This system is traced to the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688–9, in which James II was replaced by William III of Orange. It was followed by a process of constitutional, political and financial settlement, which ensured that by 1695 William was obliged to meet Parliament every year, that Parliament was elected at least every three years, and that public finance focused on a Bank of England and a national debt guaranteed by Parliament.

Furthermore, Parliament served to incorporate the powerful social groups and political interests in the country, and to ensure that the government, answerable to them in Parliament, was in some way theirs. This was more a process of combination of interests and views than simply a matter of political consent. Such a process was particularly important because of the possibility that differences in the social structure, specifically between land and trade, would lead to political division. Instead, an important aspect of the success of the House of Commons was its openness to the new emergent mercantile and industrial interests of the period: both in membership and in the House's consideration of commercial views. Commercial growth did not lead to serious social tension or political problems. An appreciable number of the businessmen in the Commons came from elite families, and the heavy representation of boroughs in the Commons increased the urban, and thus often the commercial, presence in the House. Furthermore, commercial pressure groups played a major role in the Commons. Parliament provided an opportunity for commercial groups to exert influence and to seek to define public support for commerce, greater than any forum available in France.

Parliament therefore can be presented as a crucial nexus of political, social and economic relationships that helped to create as well as define and reflect British power. This has been seen as fundamental to Britain's military power because of the central role of military expenditure in government finances. Thanks to Parliament, it was possible to obtain national public support for the government's fiscal needs, both through borrowing and through taxation. Parliament both validated existing taxes and made possible new ones. Thus, an income tax was introduced when wartime needs in the French Revolutionary War called for far more than customary wartime financial resources.

This analysis, an essentially domestic explanation of Britain's rise to greatness, is problematic for two reasons. First, it neglects or underplays the problems created by Parliament's position. Secondly, it suggests that warfare is primarily a matter of resources and domestic political circumstances.

The first is readily apparent, and is so for a number of reasons. First, it was by no means the case that Parliament accepted what the government felt to be necessary. Sir Robert Walpole's proposals to extend excise regulations to wine and tobacco in 1733, the centrepiece of his financial strategy, provoked a furious political row, and the ministry had to abandon the scheme. Although the Walpole government was opposed anyway to taking an active role in the War of the Polish Succession (1733–5), the failure of its financial plans and the evidence of a loss of control over Parliament were also important in preventing participation in the conflict, and thus in resisting France and Spain as they regained influence in Europe.

More generally, the absence of a reliable party unity on which governments could rest left ministers feeling vulnerable to attack, and this caused particular

problems in wartime. Despite devoting so much of their time to electoral patronage and parliamentary management, first ministers, such as Walpole and the Duke of Newcastle, knew that it was difficult to maintain the impression of governmental control of the Commons. In 1744 and 1746, during the War of the Austrian Succession, Lord Carteret was weakened by his inability to secure the management of the Commons. During the Seven Years' War (1756–63) the approach of the parliamentary session in 1756 destroyed the Newcastle ministry, and in the subsequent political crisis the creation of a viable leadership in the Commons was the key issue. Furthermore, the large proportion of government expenditure met by borrowing, rather than taxation, can be presented in part as a response to the known reluctance of Parliament to raise taxation.

Secondly, even if Parliament did support government proposals, that did not necessarily imply that popular consent was gained. Despite parliamentary backing in 1738 for a pacific policy towards Spain, public agitation helped to create a political crisis that led to war the following year. After the Seven Years' War the government sought to ease the burden of its debts. This was believed to be necessary in its own right and also a vital preliminary to any future conflict. However, the Cider Excise of 1763, a tax upon cider and perry made in Britain, encountered considerable opposition and was repealed in 1766, as were the Stamp Act duties imposed on the American colonies in 1765. Indeed, the danger of a parliamentary system, whether democratic, quasi-democratic or neither, was clearly reflected in this episode, because those who cannot prevail in the assembly or who feel unrepresented in it will not necessarily accept its injunctions.

Parliament sat for less than half the year and, in particular, was in recess during the summer and autumn, the campaigning seasons. Thus, it was not in session during Marlborough's very costly victory at Malplaquet (1709), or when George II and Carteret mishandled the victory at Dettingen (1743), or during the 1779 panic about a possible Bourbon invasion, or when the Revolutionary French overran the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium) in November 1792. At other times, Parliament could be the occasion of unwelcome criticism and pressure, as when William Pitt the Elder attacked the government during the Jacobite rising of 1745, and again over the feared French invasion of 1756.

The role of parliamentary opposition can be seen in two ways. Pitt can be presented as a cynical opportunist, needlessly threatening political and governmental stability at a time of national crisis. Alternatively, it can be argued that the existing government could not cope, that war accentuated a central feature of the political system, namely that successful parliamentary management required competent leadership and acceptable policies, as well as patronage, and that such policies had to take note of the wider political world, especially in periods of real and apparent crisis. Furthermore, the difficulty of managing Parliament could lead to the rise of a more competent leadership.

Thus the existence of Parliament caused serious difficulties, as well as the advantages that are generally stressed in schematic accounts. The same was true of the other representative bodies within the British empire, for this was an imperial system in which consent was institutionalized. Colonel Dudley, the Governor of Massachusetts, complained in 1703 about a lack of support:

the neighbour charter colonies of Rhode Island and Connecticut sit still covered with our forces, and will not allow me a man nor a penny towards the charge after all possible application made to them, but on the contrary in Rhode Island they hide the deserters both from the sea and land service and no regulation of trade nor observation of the Acts of Parliament are to be hoped for there.

Dudley noted that the General Assembly of Massachusetts had refused to rebuild the fort at Pemaquid, while as the Council of the colony was “of the people’s choice...I am fully doubtful they are more careful of their election than of the Queen’s service and satisfaction, in so much that I have only power to deny anything offered me that is amiss in the assembly, but no assistance to bring to pass what is necessary for the service, which will be in a great measure altered when Her Majesty will please to assume her just power to name her own Council here as in all the other governments in America”.¹

It is unclear how much weight should be placed on these problems, either with the Westminster Parliament or with other bodies. Much clearly depended and depends on an obviously subjective response to the issues of stability, continuity and order. This mirrors the role of debates over Britain’s foreign policy, strategic needs and military capability. Once it came to be necessary to translate rhetoric into policy, there was little sense of generally agreed steps, more particularly of how to respond to adversity and difficult circumstances.

In an age of competitive international relations, the Westminster Parliament was unusual in being a representative institution that survived. Thus the parliamentary system became more part of British exceptionalism. However, the very different fate of other states with such systems, such as Poland and the United Provinces (Dutch), suggests caution about placing too great an explanatory weight upon them.

Resources and war

If the existence of Parliament itself may not have been crucial to British military success, that is not a counter to the argument that the nature of British public finances was important. They were crucial to the resources available for the pursuit of security and gain. Resources were particularly important to the

ability of Britain to take part in sustained warfare, and also permitted the state and country to recover between conflicts. The success of British public finances lay in their permanence and their acceptability, allowing the shifts from war to peace and from peace to war to be made, in fiscal terms, quite effectively. As so many contemporaries acknowledged, access to funds lay at the heart of Britain's success.

However, the notion that power is a product of resources, is indeed the use of resources, has to be qualified. There are many instances of states being defeated by rivals that possessed fewer resources—most obviously, in this period, of the survival of Prussia during the Seven Years' War. More generally, any consideration of resources has to be within a number of contexts. First, political, specifically the nature and number of external and internal commitments, and the dynamics of the international system, not least the exigencies of alliance relationships. Secondly, the conversion of resources—men, *matériel* and money—into military units is and was not an automatic or uncomplicated process, but rather one that reflects and reflected different conventions and administrative practices and possibilities. Thirdly, the effectiveness and use of units and weaponry were, and are, not simply a matter of the quantity of resources, but of tactics, strategy, morale and social-military characteristics such as discipline and leadership. The notion of resources has to include non-quantifiable ones such as political skill. Two crucial issues were how much “quality” in resources could offset a lack of “quantity”, and the flexibility of the response to demands and crises. Even then, as the Duke of Cumberland pointed out in 1757, “no mortal can answer for success in military affairs”.² Later that year he was to be defeated and disgraced.

Multiple capability

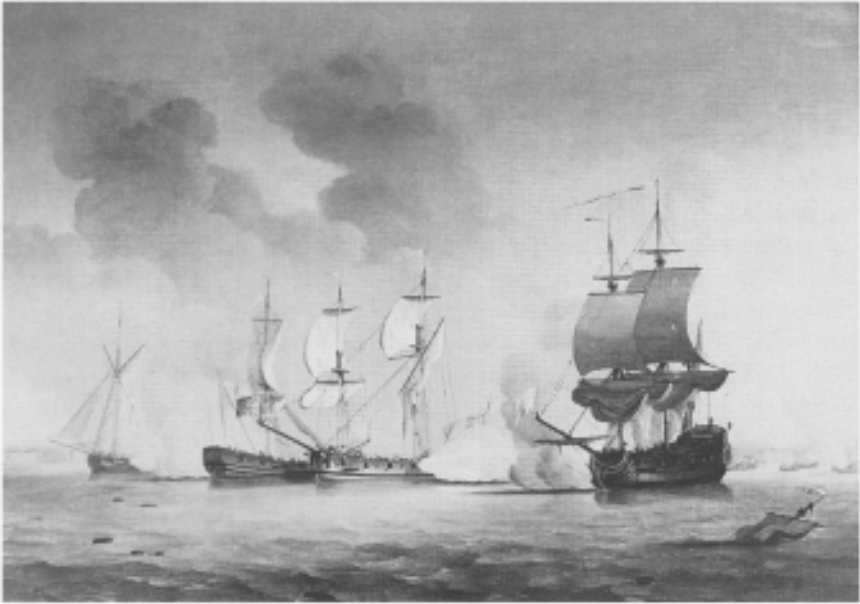
It was not the availability of resources *per se* that was crucial to the character of the British military system, certainly to the character of its system on land. Instead, this system was most impressive because of its multiple capability, one of the major themes of this book and the basis of its organization. As a military power, the British state operated in four spheres, although it did not possess a strategic theory to that effect.

The first was in opposition to public disorder and rebellion, both in the British Isles and in British overseas possessions. The most prominent instance of the latter was in opposition to the American War of Independence, but there were other, less well-known episodes, for example the campaigns against escaped slaves in Jamaica. The gap in military strength between army and insurgents was far less than would be the case in Britain today. The state did not monopolize firearms as it now seeks to do, its firearms were less powerful than the modern counterparts, and there were important traditions of military practice in parts of the imperial system.

The second sphere was as a land power fighting other land powers in Europe. Most of this conflict took place outside the British Isles, but there were exceptions caused by Bourbon intervention on behalf of the Jacobites, as in Ireland in 1690–1 and Scotland in 1719, and Revolutionary French invasions linked to opponents of the British state. British forces fought on the Continent in the Nine Years' War (1689–97), the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–13), the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–8), the Seven Years' War (1756–63), and the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815), although these dates are somewhat misleading as British armies were not engaged, or even present, throughout. Thus, in the Seven Years' War, British forces campaigned on the Continent in 1758–62 and fought from 1759. British armies were mostly deployed in Western Europe, although in 1704 they advanced to Blenheim on the Danube, and in the Napoleonic War forces were sent to the Baltic, Sicily and the eastern Mediterranean. The small size and limited training of the peacetime British army made the transition to coping with the demands of continental warfare particularly difficult. The problem was exacerbated by Britain's "late" entry into Continental campaigning in a number of wars, including the Nine Years', Austrian Succession, Seven Years' and French Revolutionary Wars. Furthermore, the British were opposed to France, then at the height of its military power. Whereas Russian armies primarily operated against weakening military powers, especially Poland and, from the 1730s, the Turks, the British fought France, particularly in an area, the Low Countries, where the latter was best able to deploy its force.

The third sphere was naval. It is difficult to appreciate the constraints of eighteenth-century naval warfare, because conditions were very different to those today. This was true of the seaworthiness of sailing vessels, which, by modern standards, lacked deep keels, as well as of the rudimentary nature of charts and lighthouses. The operational problems of working ships for combat were very different to those of steam-powered vessels. The optimal conditions for combat were to come from windward in a force 4–6 wind across a sea that was relatively flat; it was more difficult to range guns in a swell. Limitations on manoeuvrability ensured that ships were deployed in line in order to maximize their firepower. The skill in handling ships entailed getting wind behind the topsails. As battles arose from chance encounters, much had to be left to the discretion of commanders. The period is commonly remembered in terms of naval triumphs, from Barfleur (1692) to Trafalgar (1805), but there were also many checks and disappointments. It was difficult both to achieve battle and to obtain victory.

The fourth sphere of operation was trans-oceanic land conflict. This can in turn be divided into two categories: warfare with European land forces, as against the French in North America, the West Indies, West Africa and India, the Spaniards in Cuba, the Philippines and the Plate Estuary, and the Dutch in South Africa, Surinam and the West Indies; and warfare with non-European



English Privateers engaging, by Samuel Scott, c.1750. Privateers were smaller and less heavily-gunned than ships of the line, but they were more manoeuvrable and of shallower draft, and thus more appropriate for commerce raiding. The major role of privateers and of light warships—frigates, sloops, ketches etc.—is a reminder of the danger of concentrating on ships of the line and major engagements in any account of naval history. French bases, especially St. Malo and Dunkirk, proved difficult to contain and the British suffered greatly from the *guerre de course*. Higher insurance premiums, danger money for sailors, and the need to resort to convoys and other defensive measures pushed up the cost of trade. Largely thanks to the British, nearly 1,800 ships and barges insured at Marseilles were captured in the Spanish Succession War. *National Maritime Museum, London.*

forces. The last was by far the most varied category of British military activity. The formal nature of hostilities varied greatly—whether, for example, the British were formally at war or not, or whether they were engaged as the auxiliaries of other powers or in their own right. Operational circumstances and possibilities also varied greatly. Fighting in India, for example, was very different to conflict with Native Americans in North America, and each was in turn very varied.

Such a multiple capability was not unique to Britain. Indeed, it was true of all the Atlantic European powers—Britain, the United Provinces, France, Spain and Portugal. A different multiple capability was also true of Austria and Russia. Austria did not engage in trans-oceanic military activities, and neither did Russia, with the minor exception of fighting in the Aleutian Islands and Alaska, unless Siberia is considered as a land ocean. However, in the case of Austria the Turks, and in Russia the Turks, Persians and various Caucasian